In the past, foods were primarily recognized for their essential nutrients and the role they play in normal body activity and function. However, during the past decades, consumers have changed their perception: most consumers believe that ‘we are what we eat’ and they are actively using food to prevent health issues and medical conditions (Nielsen Survey, 2015). Following this new consumer trend, the food industry introduced a new category of products named ‘functional foods’: food or food ingredient that may provide a health benefit beyond the traditional nutrients it contains (Hassler, 2002).

Consistent with this definition, in the past years, numerous studies showed how beer could rightfully enter in the functional food category. In addition to the documented health benefit related to moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages (about 1 drink/day for women and 2 drinks/days for men as defined by 2005 USDA Dietary Guideline) such as improved bone density, lower risk of cardiovascular disease and rheumatoid arthritis, increased HDL (high density lipoprotein) level and cognitive score, lower type 2 diabetes risk (Kubo et al., 2013; McLernan et al., 2012; Lucas et al., 2005; Rimm and Moats, 2007; Lu et al., 2014; Waśkiewicz and Sygnowska, 2013; Arranz et al., 2012; Kesse-Guyot et al., 2012; Adjemian et al., 2015), beers also contains specific and unique compounds, which positively affect health. Recent studies showed that minerals, vitamins, antioxidant and natural phytoestrogen that can be isolated from beer have chemo preventive activities, inhibit carcinogenesis progression, increase first line immune response, decrease Parkinson’s disease (PD) risk, and play a positive role in osteoporosis control (Tanwar and Modgil, 2012; Arranz et al., 2012; Gerhauser, 2005; Romeo et al., 2007; Liu et al. 2013; Medina et al., 2015; Possemiers et al., 2006).

However, even though scientific evidences link moderate beer consumption to clear health benefits, beer, nowadays, is not marketed as a functional food. Could these insights be used to change beer marketing in the near future? Are consumers ready to change their opinion about this product? As wine during the French paradox, could beer make the shift from a leisure/recreational beverage to a functional beverage?

Using online survey as a data collection method and independent scientific evidence as health claims back up, this study investigates overall consumer attitude toward functional food, consumer perception of beer related health claims, changes in consumer attitude toward beer (and, consequently, willingness to pay) when the link between consumption and increased health is shown. Survey participants were recruited using a snowball methods among the volunteers that fulfill the following requirements: a) must be at least 18 years of age (legal drinking age in European countries) b) consume occasionally or regularly alcoholic beverages.

Approved participants (n=500) were randomly assigned to the control or the test group. While control group was not exposed to any product claims, test group will be asked to review some beer and health claims. Claims were based on available scientific literature on the subject and pre-tested for clarity, quality and vividness. Test subjects acknowledgement of these claims was tested by a survey manipulation check question.
Together with socio-demographic information, like income, gender, and education, answers to designed questions adapted from related literature are analyzed to address our research questions and to identify possible specific consumer groups that can be specifically targeted by health based marketing.

Being identified as functional foods can, often, revitalize the market of a whole category as proved by the oat bran cereal case in the 80’s and the French Paradox in the 90’s. In addition, it allows a product to access a steadily growing market that, in 2013, was worth about USD43.27bn, with an increase of 26.7% compared with 2009. However, despite these numbers, functional product success isn’t guarantee: a product which enters the functional food market arena, has to establish a relationship of trust with the consumer. Even when used in accordance with country legislation, health claims are acknowledge by consumers only when they can be perceived as reliable and produced by independent and highly credible source.

Giving the fact that beer consumption widely varies among different countries ranging from the 143 l/person in Czech Republic to 43 l/person in Japan, it is safe to conclude that beer entrance into the functional food arena could increase its volume sale especially in countries in which its consumption is still marginal. Potentially, beer could enter these emerging markets with a premium price since, in these countries, the interest in functional food match the willingness to pay a premium price for acquire it.

Keywords: beer, health, beverage marketing, consumer behavior, willingness to pay, cognitive processing,

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